

Signs of Change

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About the author

S. Viswanathan (1939-2019)



- Social activist, journalist, editor
- Born in Sri Lanka
- Masters in Economics
- In 1961 joined The Indian Express as sub editor
- In 1993 joined The Hindu as a special correspondent
- Articles on the conditions of Dalits in rural TN are remarkable
- Remarkable articles on the socio-political conditions in TN
- Book: Dalits in Dravidian Land
- Member of one of the panels of Sahitya Akademy

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An Overview

- ▶ The passage is a commentary on the 73rd amendment of the Constitution of India.
- ▶ The act provides for **statutory reservation of elected posts for women.**
- ▶ **Issues of the scheduled castes**
- ▶ How caste comes in the way of Dalit empowerment in Tamil Nadu?

Paragraphs 1

The Constitution Amendment Act of 1993

- ▶ **The Constitution Amendment Act of 1993** is hailed as a breakthrough in effecting a vibrant system of participatory democracy at the grassroots level and a paradigm shift in the process of development.
- ▶ The act gives guidelines for the states to put in place the three-tier '**Panchayati Raj**' institutions.
- ▶ The act generated a lot of hope about **empowering the weaker sections, especially the rural women and scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.**
- ▶ The act for the first time provided statutory **reservation of elected posts in local bodies for women, besides Scheduled Castes(Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes.**

Paragraph 2

Hope and Fears

- ▶ Great expectations as Tamil Nadu Panchayats Acts (1994) passed under the provisions of the Constitution Amendment Act.
- ▶ The state had no elected local bodies for more than a decade.
- ▶ It generated apprehensions that the elections might add to the tensions in the rural TN where Dalits are victims of caste-created violence.
- ▶ **Hindu fundamentalist leaders raised questions** and challenged the reservations of seats for Dalits in local bodies.

Paragraph 3

The consequences

- ▶ In the elections of 1996, Dalits were prevented from filing nominations in several villages where reservations were to be effected.
- ▶ In five villages elections could not be held for the full five-year term from 1996 to 2001.
- ▶ Elections were held in two panchayats in 2002.
- ▶ But the elected Presidents resigned within days of assuming charge under pressure from caste- Hindus

Other tortures on the Dalits

- ▶ Many women Panchayat presidents suffered humiliation at the hands of caste Hindus
- ▶ Caste Hindus made many Dalits as proxies for them
- ▶ In 1997 six Dalits were executed
- ▶ Hindus who were sympathetic to the Dalits were also tortured.

Uphill task for the elected Dalits

- ▶ Fear of facing the hostile people
- ▶ Fear of convening meetings
- ▶ Police and higher officials' apathy
- ▶ Consolation:
- ▶ Some departments of state and central governments supported the Dalits
- ▶ Aid from NGOs
- ▶ Training programmes and workshops arranged by supporters.
- ▶ **The consistent help from left parties**

Dalit empowerment gains momentum

- ▶ After two elections, the ground situations with regard to the empowerment of Dalits and women seemed to change for the better.
- ▶ The condition in southern districts like Thirunelveli and Madurai, which were epicentres of caste-based atrocities seemed to improve.
- ▶ Perceptible level of improvement in women and Dalit assertion.
- ▶ They became more aware of their rights and responsibilities.

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- ▶ Caste Hindus slowly realized the need to change their mindset towards Dalits and women.
- ▶ Encouraging response from the revenue administration despite the delayed assistance from the state and central governments
- ▶ Complaints of officials' indifference towards Dalits and women are fewer.
- ▶ Yet the non Dalit consolidation was evident at certain places.
- ▶ When some Dalit leaders had to run for life others had considerable support from well-wishers.

Mixed Response

- ▶ Angry caste Hindus interrupted the polls of 1996.
- ▶ Some Dalit leaders had to go underground.
- ▶ Some caste Hindus approved of the elected Dalits for the state assistance in such panchayats.
- ▶ “We do not want our villages to be left behind in development”, some caste Hindus said.
- ▶ Support of AIDMK to some Dalits
- ▶ Many Dalit leaders suffered while confronting poachers, sand mining mafia and liquor barons and some were remarkably successful in such encounters.

More instances of Difficulties Dalit leaders faced

The case of Parvati

- ▶ K. Parvati, a Dalit Panchayat President, who got elected for a second spell had to confront hostility from an influential vice-president from the dominant Marava community.
- ▶ Members prevented her from conducting council meetings.
- ▶ She had to seek police aid to evict outsiders; convened public meeting; and explained to the general public her difficulties.
- ▶ “If I could get elected, it was because I moved with everyone, irrespective of caste and community...”, she said.
- ▶ Her experience as a social worker as a social uplift worker proved useful in discharging her duties as Panchayat President.
- ▶ Her own Dalit community did not stand by her in the 2001 elections.
- ▶ She made every Dalit of her zone independent, they no more had to depend on others for basic needs.

The case of Chellappan

- ▶ Chellappan was a Dalit Panchayat president who got elected from Thadianpatti Village in Tirunelveli.
- ▶ He attributed his success to the fact that he always considered Dalits and non- Dalits equally and worked hard for their welfare.
- ▶ Dalits alleged that all benefits were reserved by him for the non-Dalits and the minority Dalit sect to which the president belonged.
- ▶ They claimed that Chellappan was under the control of Caste Hindus.

Conclusion

- ▶ No Dalit can win without the support of at least a section of the non-Dalits.
- ▶ When Dalits come to power difference of opinion is likely from among themselves.
- ▶ Some are cold-shouldered and some face humiliation.
- ▶ In several places caste- Hindus take advantage of the chaos.
- ▶ “This, however, is only a passing phase. Dalits will soon realize that their strength lies in their unity”, observes a Dalit activist.